

franciscan

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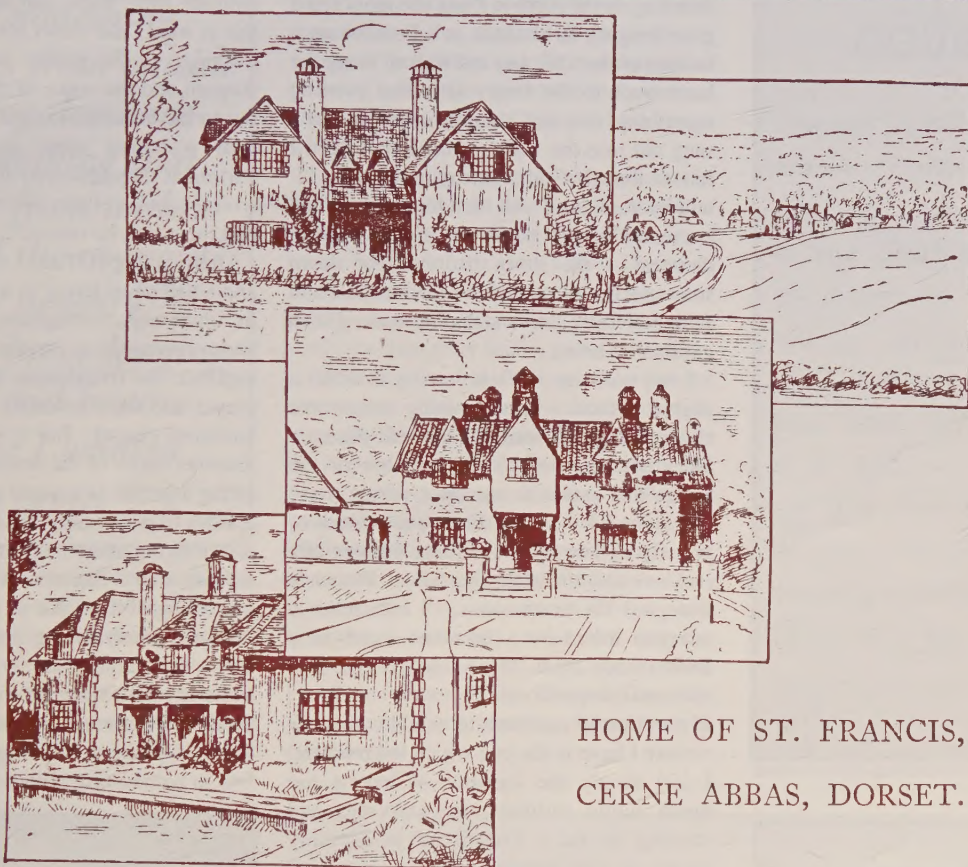
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THE HOMES OF SAINT FRANCIS.
TEMPLE-GAIRDNER HOSTEL.

JULY-AUGUST, 1932.

THE FLOWERET



HOME OF ST. FRANCIS,
CERNE ABBAS, DORSET.

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Middlebank Opening Ceremony

How to Help

The Outcast

The Chapter

Bro. Alec. Christie

Anonymous

John Waldron

Post free 1s. 6d. a year from The Editor, Cerne Abbas, Dorset.

*The SSF Brothers are celebrating seventy-five years of Franciscan life at Hilfield
(see centre pages)
and above is reproduced a facsimile of an early edition of "The Floweret",
the community's first magazine*



Religious Vocation

"Why I came", "Why I stayed", "Why they left", "Why?". As the 75th anniversary of the foundation of Religious Life at Hilfield Friary is celebrated, we offer some flavour of our contemporary vocations to SSF: nascent, ongoing, past and future. Also included is a reflection on the meaning of the Stigmata of St Francis from the author of the forthcoming history of SSF in the European Province.

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Why I Came

by Brother Nicholas Alan SSF,
Novice



As the rain fell steadily in the darkness, soaking slowly into my coat, I could only see the way ahead by the grey strip of sky between the not-quite-touching trees overhead. I had walked to Sherborne that morning and was now walking the ten miles back to Hilfield Friary having missed the last bus. It was Francistide and at Sherborne Abbey I had stumbled across a choir festival in honour of Saint Francis.

Standing in the Abbey, I had suddenly felt a great longing to be there as a Franciscan, a brother of the SSF, and as I walked along the lanes back to the Friary later that evening something was still singing inside me as I sang out into the night. And as I walked I felt as though God was saying to me: "It will be hard, but I will be with you." When I eventually got back, the Friary was in darkness – the storm had brought down some electricity cables – so I lit a candle and sank gratefully into a steaming bath. It felt good to be home.

I had come to Hilfield having finished a degree in theology and wanting somewhere to think through some of the half-digested ideas of three years' study. One of the things that spoke to me most during those four months was the Franciscan ideal of poverty. There was something wonderfully reckless and life-affirming about Francis's disregard for possessions. I remember a question asked by a Buddhist monk in a book I once read: "How can you be both rich and compassionate?"

It's a simple question to which the only answer I have is the one which led me here. I feel deeply the injustice of having too much while millions are starving, and wanting to be a Franciscan is certainly bound up with wanting to make some kind of statement against the accumulated wealth of the West.

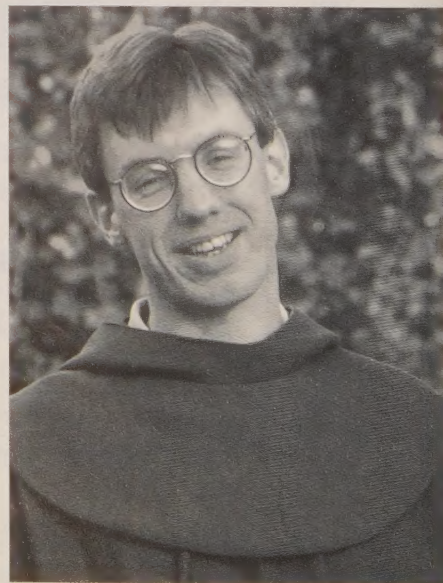
But this uneasiness about possessions was not in the end the main factor for me. As St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, to follow in the way of Christ is to be "poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything." That vision captures my imagination and I feel its truth in my bones. Choosing poverty seemed to me not a response to guilt but a celebration of the richness of God's creation. I wanted to let go of what I had, truly to enjoy and share in God's great generosity and open-handedness.

* * *

Travelling through Greece and Turkey with a friend from college my thoughts kept returning to the question of choosing a

celibate life. How can anyone know that this is what God wants for them? Then one evening, as the golden sun sank into the Aegean and the wake of the ferry stretched out to the horizon, I stood at the rails of the boat watching some gulls soaring and darting as they followed alongside. And the words came welling up from inside: "... and there will be others."

After leaving Hilfield I spent the next two and a half years living in a small community in inner-city Nottingham. I have many happy memories of my time there: the meals together, the friendships, the early morning prayer and the Eucharists we shared in the basement chapel. But it was also a time to discover some of the stresses and strains of living together as a small group, with all the clashes of personality and temperament, and just of living amid the pressures of an 'urban priority area'. But what it did show me was something of the value of simply attempting to live together, living the Christian life. I don't like living alone. I need times of solitude and a space of my own, but I also need others around me, just to share the day-to-day experience of living. So being able to live in community with both its freedom of



Brother Nicholas Alan joined the community in 1995 and, after a year at Hilfield Friary, is now at Glasshampton.

space and its warmth of support was another of the factors drawing me to the SSF.

But it's not just about the SSF. It's also about joining the family of all Religious of whatever denomination and indeed through the ages, becoming a brother with many, many brothers and sisters. Becoming part of that wider family brings a great sense of belonging and of finding a place and meaning in life.

* * *

Incense hung in the warm summer air. The golden statue of the Buddha looked serenely down, offerings of flowers and fruit spread

I want.

After two years of inter-faith work in Nottingham and two years studying Buddhism in Bristol, I wanted to know more about Buddhism as it is lived in Asia. This led me to Korea for three years with the Church Mission Society to teach English at the Anglican university in Seoul and to explore further the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity.

Getting to know people of other faiths has convinced me that perhaps the most important meeting point of all is in prayer. It is as we pray that we find ourselves in the presence of that which is beyond us all, and I came to realise that in order to know my friends of other faiths more fully I would have to go into my own faith more deeply as well, particularly in the life of prayer. But praying by yourself is so difficult. I knew something of the strength of the corporate saying of the Offices and the encouragement of living with others committed to prayer. I knew that I needed that again if I was to go further myself.

Early one crisp Spring Sunday morning in the crypt chapel of Seoul Anglican Cathedral, kneeling next to one of the sisters of the Society of the Holy Cross, I knew in myself that the time had come. It was as if an alarm-clock had gone off in my head, or a rain-swollen river finally burst its banks.

It seems to me that vocation is not something that comes from outside imposing demands, but something that wells up from within, with all the strength and urgency of a deep inner longing. In the end, I came because I wanted to come. Not that the superficial 'I', the personality and character I so hang on to and depend on, wanted this life which challenges and unsettles in so many ways: but that the deeper 'I', the one I long to set free, that self heard the rumours of this life as if from a far distance and came running. It was time to come home.

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in the way of St Francis of Assisi,
in humility, love and joy.

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In the end I came
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at his feet. Seated around the room, our bodies stiff from a day's meditation, we listened to the tick of the clock counting the last few moments of our time together. And then the slightest breeze brushed against a chime hanging from the eaves of the temple. And suddenly I knew: that's it. That's what

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Theme Prayer

**Lord Jesus Christ,
who taught us that those who lose their life
for your sake
will find it:**

**grant that those whom you have called to the Religious Life
may hear and obey your voice;
we ask this in your name.**



Why I Stayed

by Brother Anselm SSF

'Why?' is about cause, about motive – a good old-fashioned linear hunt for logical answers to plain questions. It takes for granted that God and we are children of the enlightenment, alumni of the Areopagus, pupils of Pascal, and that after 1200 words there will be a clear answer – we shall 'know' 'why'. But this is not that sort of pursuit – this is a lateral hunt for hints. It offers a study of one life in the context of the Society of Saint Francis, and because a focus is needed, specifically in the light of 'The Principles' of the Society.

Here we find three 'Conditions of Life', three 'Ways of Service' and three 'Notes of the Order'.

'These, after a sufficient period of probation, voluntarily in response to God's call, dedicate themselves to a life of devotion to our Lord under the conditions of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.'

*The quest
for a simple lifestyle
for celibacy lived in
community,
for a life lived in obedience
'to rule and chapter'
began at Hilfield*

The first section belongs to searching youth – to the young man who had experienced school till 18, then 18 months' National Service (army), then university; with a degree in engineering, and conflicting parental ambitions for him (which he did not fulfil); a genuine piety which came in very different ways from both parents, and a fascination for the Franciscan legend. That was the being upon whom this vocation dawned – vocation to a life under the conditions of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The quest for a simple lifestyle, for celibacy lived in community, for a life lived in obedience 'to rule and chapter' began at Hilfield where the bare boards of the dormitory, the total lack of privacy and the exposure to the unpredictable demands of the community on one's gardening and driving skills, gave us all an undiluted diet of poverty, chastity and obedience. This, taken with a rich application of instruction – in scripture, doctrine, Religious Life, Francis – was what amounted to the formation of a novice. There have to be added the nine months' enclosure at Glasshampton and numerous excursions to preach in village churches and to help on parish missions.

Three years of this resulted for me in election to profession in the formal vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

But the conditions of life can never be seen as an achievement to be put in the past. They will always remain the impossibly high ideal, something to be aimed at, a background to life. The next question will be, of what does the living consist? What am I actually going to do? Not engineering, for which I was educated. I was then a layman, so not ordained ministry. What?

'The brothers and sisters seek to serve their Master by the life of devotion, by sacred study and by works.'

Devotion for all of us means prayer, the Offices, the Eucharist; study, sacred study; and works?

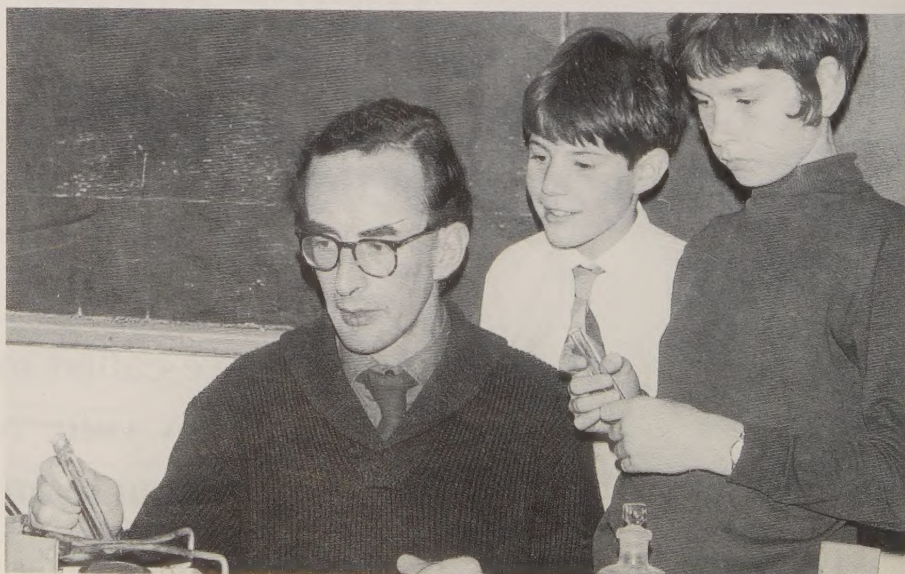
The first twenty years of my professed life were to be given to Saint Francis' School for Boys. There cannot be a more absorbing task than work in a boarding school, and of boarding schools what for a friar could have been more appropriate than St Francis School, a community within the community of SSF, the profession of whose professionals was to be a community for and with the boys? Among the hills and woods of West Dorset we worked and played, loved and hated, were battered and found

healing, absconded and came back, eventually left. Friars and sisters taught, cared, tackled mountains of washing up and prayed together in that wonderful chapel in the attic within easy earshot of swimming pool, front drive, beech tree – all populated at one time or another by noisy boys.

Of course, it wasn't all laughter – we were a community of damaged people whose healing depended on a shared vulnerability and (on the part of the adults concerned) an awareness of and sensitivity to that fact. Staff and boys alike were dependent on psychiatric and psychological support within the strength we derived from God's grace and love. There were many tears and sadnesses, without which the fun would not have been such a constant and unfailing surprise.

*We could be poor,
chaste, obedient,
devout, studious,
hard working –
self-righteous,
boring and deadily.
Humility, love and joy
come to the rescue.*

My time at the school came to an end, and I found myself for a short while without the sense of purpose which work in a close-knit group gives. For three months I was adrift, until another group (this time the brothers of our province) found me a task – I was in service once more, this time as Minister Provincial. These were years of mobility – years of petrol and kerosene driven travel. It was a time of growing familiarity with the motorway network, travel agents, transit lounges, jumbo cabins – and a growing love for Franciscan destinations – Brisbane, New York, Auckland, Honiara, Port Moresby, San Francisco, and dearest of all, Dar es



Brother Anselm teaching chemistry at St Francis' School, Hooke, in the late 1960's

Salaam. And for the brothers (of course).

To balance the mobility, I was given stability in my home friary in the East Midlands where I shared with three brothers in a varied local ministry (half time for me) and enjoyed the work provided by the garden. The children in the nearby nursery class, the old folks in the home next door, the garden, local homeless people, my brothers – all played a part in my stability, my staying. Did leadership?

There are many instances in the history of Religious Life of the unsettling effect which isolated and unsupported leadership positions can have on their occupants. In spite of the distance which a position of power puts between the Minister and his brothers, I don't think I was ever allowed to feel isolated or unsupported – even tension and conflicts can have a positive outcome in community life.

At the end of my term of office I was not left for long to wonder what the future held for me by way of 'works'. For ten years I had been a priest friar – now I was to be a parish priest friar, at sixty plus to have my first incumbency, and that in the Church of St Bene't's Cambridge where, at the age of eighteen, I saw my first friar.

During the active stages of life it is the pursuit of devotion, study and works under the conditions of poverty, chastity and obedience which are the dominant themes from the Principles.

'The three notes which must ever in special degree mark the lives of the brothers and sisters are Humility, Love and Joy.'

We could be poor, chaste, obedient, devout, studious, hard working – self-righteous, boring and deadly. Humility, love and joy come to the rescue. And they, when the hustle and bustle are over, are all that is left.

I am still searching for an answer to the question of why I stayed. A biographical sketch has shown why it would have been difficult to leave – but that is no theological justification for staying. This is not be found in the CV, only in that of which God is the judge. Only he knows whether, in the end, this is what he meant when I thought I heard him calling.

We are in the realm of faith, not that of knowledge. I can only say that I stay because I believe that to do so is for me the only way to live my baptism into Christ – and I pray that I may be faithful when the more superficial compensations fall away and I am left with God's mercy and grace, and the unmerited and continuing love of the brethren.

'It is the purpose of Christ our master to work miracles through his servants, and if they will but be emptied of self and utterly surrendered to Him, they will become chosen vessels of his Spirit and effective instruments of his mighty working, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive.'

From Nelson Mandela's Speech on his Inauguration as President of South Africa

"Our deepest fear
is not that we are inadequate.
It is that we are powerful
beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness,
that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves,
'Who am I to be brilliant,
gorgeous, talented and fabulous?'
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small
doesn't serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened
about shrinking
so that other people
won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest
the glory of God
that is within us;
it is in everyone!
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other
people
permission to do the same.
As we are liberated
from our own fear,
our presence automatically
liberates others!"

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The Community of Saint Francis

Compton Durville Open Day

Saturday, 10th May 1997

12 noon	Opening Worship
1.30 pm	Compton Durville House News
2.00 pm	Workshops
3.30 pm	Tea
4.00 pm	Eucharist

All Welcome

Bring a picnic lunch – drinks and Tea supplied



Why They Left

By Brother Michael SSF

On my desk is a group photograph. It has been there ever since it was taken in January 1969. It shows the novices and postulants gathered at Hilfield for their first conference after I became Minister Provincial. Of the twenty-seven brothers, twelve remained in the Society, of which six have died. What happened to the others? Why did they leave?

There are also four sisters in the picture, of whom one died, one is in the USA, and the other two left. It was, at that time, a daring innovation to have them there at all! But I shall not be so presumptuous as to say why the sisters left for the dynamics of men's and women's communities, despite similarities, are different.

*So why did they leave?
In the postulancy
and noviciate,
the withdrawal is not
usually so much to do
with the vows,
but more the question of
living in a close-knit
community.*

Perhaps I should start to answer our question by reminding you of the process by which a man becomes a brother. It can take a long time – up to ten years – for a brother is not fully a member until he is Life Professed. There are three stages leading to that commitment, during all of which he is free to leave.

First, he is admitted as a postulant, a period of up to a year, to accustom him to our way of life. When thought ready, the Novice Guardian recommends him to the Minister to become a Novice, under a vow of Obedience. During that time, as in the postulancy, he is free to leave.

After three years as a novice, he is professed, formally taking the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. The intention is for life but this too must have a period of testing, between three and seven years, according to the needs of the individual.

Then come the Life Vows, a solemn commitment in the presence of the Bishop Protector, the vows taken for the rest of the brother's life. This is obviously a very serious decision, but even from these vows

there can be dispensation but it requires the express permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury, after authority has been given by the Community Chapter and the Bishop Protector. This is allowed for by a phrase used in the ceremony when the vows are taken: "unless for reasons hidden in the will of God you are released from your vows by it lawful authorities."

This is no 'escape clause': it acknowledges that there can be developments in the spiritual life which lead to changes in all aspects of a brother's life, something brought home to me last year, when one of the 1969 group of novices was released from his vows in March and married in September, after nearly thirty years in the Society! Attitudes to such a development have changed. Years ago, it would have been seen as shameful and a betrayal of Religious Life. Now there is much more understanding and, at Franciscan gatherings, there is often a sprinkling of ex-brothers with their wives or partners and children, knowing that they did the right thing in leaving.

From time to time, there are those too who look back and wonder whether it was a mistake. Certainly, time in the Society is acknowledged as leaving an indelible mark on all the men and women who join it.

So why did they leave? In the postulancy and noviciate, the withdrawal is not usually so much to do with the vows, but more the question of living in a close-knit community.

There can be a romantic illusion of liberty and freedom, an opportunity for prayer, a shared enthusiasm, an identity of purpose which makes the enforced rules, use of time and common life an adventure. It wears off. Learning to live with the eccentricities of others, to endure what begins to appear as trivial and inhibiting restrictions, is another matter and can lead to disillusionment.

The progress of each novice is carefully monitored to see if he has a true vocation and whether it fits with SSF's vision. Sometimes as a result novices are asked or guided to leave. Only after much heart-searching will a Novice Guardian recommend that a novice is not suitable, but it does happen.

Those who leave at a later stage, after first profession, often have more complex reasons. The very act of taking vows with a life intention can be a catalyst to realising

*Those who leave
at a later stage,
after first profession,
often have more complex
reasons.*

*The very act of taking vows
with a life intention
can be a catalyst to realising
that the life of a friar
is not for them.*

that the life of a friar is not for them. There was a time (despite what was said to the contrary) when vows could be a restriction on emotional growth. Obedience meant you did what you were told, without question. Now the freedom to question and be markedly part of decision-making has changed all that. There was a time too when money and finance were never discussed. That is now different and the Vow of Poverty is given much wider terms of



The first novice conference of the Society, January 1969

Minister's Letter

Sister Joyce,
Minister Provincial of the First Order Sisters
in the European Province, writes:



Minister, I have no doubt there will be more struggling to come for me and for the Province. Exactly what those issues will be are hidden in the mind of God.

As we celebrate this Christmas, may we give thanks once again for the gift of God's Son, the Word made flesh, and may the New Year bring many blessings.

Joyce C.S.F.

On becoming a Minister, I find myself in quite a challenging role! It feels scary and exciting at the same time. I am deeply conscious of the strong foundations that have been laid by past leaders of the Community, and especially of my predecessor, Nan, during whose time as Minister we initiated the Provincial Review: of where we have been as a group of Religious women in a still largely-patriarchal Church. But the future, I hope, may be even brighter than orange! Right now, it feels to me to be more like the poet Adrienne Rich describes:

The rules break like a thermometer, quicksilver spills across the charted systems, we're out in a country that has no language, no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren through gorges unexplored since dawn whatever we do together is pure invention the maps they gave us were out of date by years . . .

The fruits of the wrestling we have done as a consequence of the Provincial Review Report are now beginning to ripen. From this has emerged a new solidarity; a clearer sense of vision for our houses and our Province; energy has been released for mission.

The fragility and vulnerability are still

there. We can still limp like Jacob, but also know that, in the all-night struggle, God has richly blessed us.

I happened to be present at Southwark Cathedral when the beautiful memorial to those who died in the *Marchioness* disaster on the Thames some years ago, was blessed by the Provost. It was a moving experience to witness the number of relations and friends who had gathered to remember their loved ones, whose names are now etched in stone, with the appropriate inscription from the Song of Songs: *Many waters cannot quench love . . .* This group of people have undoubtedly struggled with God to make sense of their tragic and sudden loss, for justice in finding out what really went wrong that night, when so many young people died because they happened to attend a friend's birthday party. They are still limping in their grief – I pray they may receive God's blessing too.

Reflecting on the theme of *franciscan*, the same image emerged of Jacob wrestling with God through the night. For whether we come, stay or leave the community, we can only discern the way forward on our pilgrimage after we have struggled, usually well beyond all night, with God. As

reference. The same is true of sexuality in all its aspects. Once it was suppressed; now celibacy is discussed with an openness which is entirely new.

*The contribution made
by former brothers and sisters
of the Society of Saint Francis
to the Church
and to the world
reflects well on their time
with us.
In the economy of God,
nothing is lost.*

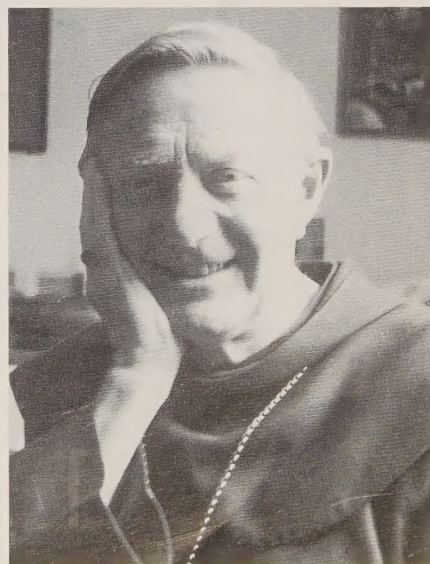
Taking vows today therefore can encourage, rather than inhibit, areas of personal growth. They emphasise them in a way not experienced before. It is increasingly difficult to use Religious Life as a path of avoidance, as in years gone by. Being challenged in the context of a group living together can mean a brother grows out of what he thought was his vocation. Many leave to marry or explore relationships. Others desire the chance to manage their

own resources, whilst another group discover a new rôle – as a social worker or parish priest – which he feels he can fulfil outside the structures of obedience. He needs to make his decisions individually rather than as part of a group.

Those who are dispensed from Life Vows are fewer in number and follow no fixed pattern. Some might be thought to have a 'mid-life crisis', but this is too easy a description. There can be, however, a turning-point in their lives: "too late to turn back, too fearful to go on", a spiritual and emotional crisis related to physical and emotional change. It can be a crucial stage of growth and those who have the courage find new life beyond it.

For some, it is because they feel the community has changed and, though we would like to think that the Franciscan spirit of the community remains the same, there have been changes in our Rule and Constitution. So they say: 'This is not the community I joined'. They leave in some pain, for them and us, in relation to constitutional changes or radical rethinking of the Society's life. This was particularly true in the 1960's when changes were dramatic and far-reaching. For some, the change in old structures and ways of life and prayer laid bare the roots of their beliefs. In trying to adjust, they lost their faith, or their vocations to SSF.

And when they have left, what do they do? The answer is rather reassuring. The majority go into 'caring' professions: the probation service, nursing, counselling, hospices, teaching, the ordained ministry. There are former brothers and sisters caring for people with AIDS, teaching the deaf, helping the severely handicapped, and so on. It reflects a contribution made by the Society to the Church and the world. In the economy of God, nothing is lost.



Brother Michael SSF

Seventy-five Years of



Brother Lawrence ringing the Angelus, 1922



Brother Giles (far right), Brother Lawrence (far left), Brother Charles Boyd (back row, 4th from left) & Brother Roger Fox (in front of Charles), together with Wayfarers, 1922



The community processing to 'Cross Prayers' after supper, 1971



Loading the van with garden and kitchen produce, for sale in Dorchester Market, 1930s



Vegetable gardening before 1930; Bernard House can be clearly seen through the archway, before any building on the site now occupied by Leo House



The opening day of the swimming pool, built by the masters and boys of Sherborne School and Westminster School, Summer 1937;

it subsequently closed in the late 1970s with the introduction of more-strict hygiene regulations

In the early evening habited friars said Dorset. Thus began Assisi. Brother Giles cart the three miles two from the train there was little heat warmed the room at the first chapel. S spiritual foundation 1996 is the 75th b

Soon after the b arrived from Oxford become a Home f hardship as there increasing number help. Yet the sma were professed by t

In 1936, Father Cambridgeshire joined and he took over created the Society organisational skills During the Second evacuated children home. It developed

Algy died in 1951 Denis, Oswald, M and now Samuel. has remained a centre of hospitality (including groups) and of care homeless and distressed try their vocations end of their lives are part of 75 years

And it all began in a dilapidated f



Father Charles (on his left) and St Ives, Father A together with novices 1937, incorporating

ciscan Life at Hilfield

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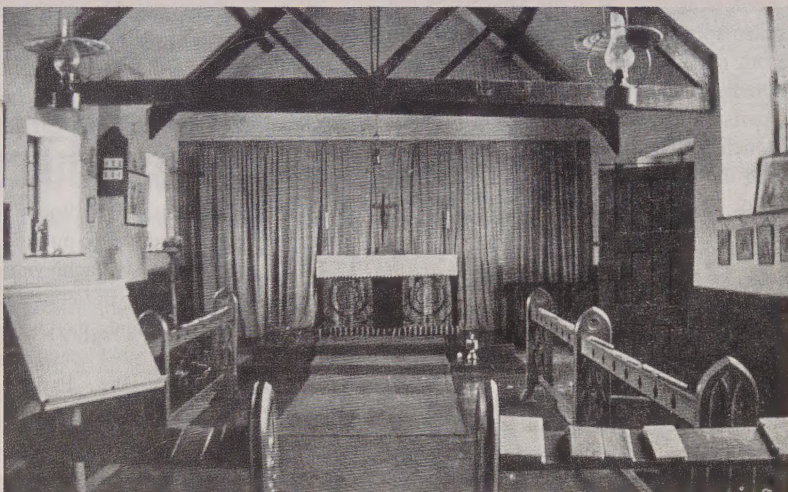
Companion Tony Barnard (Chancellor of Lichfield Cathedral) and Brother Ramon, digging the grave of Brother Nicholas in the Friary Cemetery, 1983



Brother Roger & his bees, 1970



Brothers Kenneth & Silyn, 1980; Kenneth joined in 1925 and was in profession for over sixty years, spending most of them at Hilfield



St Francis' Chapel in the early-1930s, when it occupied only the eastern half of the area it now occupies



Francis Tyndale-Biscoe, twice of the Community at Hilfield, and Brother Douglas (right) at the inauguration of SSF in 1921, the first of the Franciscan communities in the land



Brother Matthew & Paul Simpson, working in the basket shop, circa 1968

Community Routes

◆◆ St Francis Gladstone Park

Plans for **Damian, Angelo, Peter Douglas** and **Tristram** to move into the former vicarage of St Francis Church, Gladstone Park (in the Willesden Green part of north London) took a further step forward in November when the London Diocese gave its formal approval to the invitation of Father Scott Anderson, the Rector of the parish of which St Francis is a part. At the time of going to press, most of the brothers hope to arrive in the new year. The move for Damian and Angelo from Scunthorpe to London will provide a more accessible provincial office, while Peter Douglas is to give part-time assistance in the local parishes. Tristram hopes to arrive soon after Easter. This will be an opportunity to strengthen the Franciscan witness in the Metropolis but it is also specifically intended that we try to live out the 'two integrity' situation of our Community and of our Church in the context of a parish aligned to the 'Forward in Faith' movement. The Diocese of London has offered the property to SSF on a rent-free, cost-free basis for five years.

◆◆ Scunthorpe

The Scunthorpe friary closed in December 1996 after thirteen fruitful and happy years. For it was in January 1984, that Brothers Anselm and Christopher took up residence there. The Wantage Sisters had then recently left Lincoln, and the Bishop invited SSF to open the house in order for there to be an Anglican Religious Community in the Diocese. Scunthorpe became an administrative centre

for our Community, with the Minister Provincial living there, first Anselm (1984-91) and then Damian (1993-). Opportunities for local ministry soon emerged and brothers became engaged in a variety of work. Cuthbert was involved with youth clubs, and Gordon with the disabled. Martin became heavily involved in S. Hugh's church and parish, doing some teaching at a school in Brigg and from 1993 being chaplain of a new hospice for cancer patients. Other brothers based at the house have been Jonathan, Gregory, Harry, Hubert and Angelo, who have pursued a range of ministries.

◆◆ Degree of Distinction

Alistair has distinguished himself in completing his doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of East Anglia at Norwich. Not only has he passed his placements in five different fields (children, adults, the elderly, psychotherapy and learning disabilities), he has also been awarded a distinction for his thesis. The subject of his research was 'early warning signs in manic depressive illness' and his examiners have urged him to publish parts of it. So his is an impressive achievement.

Alistair starts a new job in January, working part-time as a clinical psychologist in Cambridge. He will also spend one day a week working in the Psychotherapy Department at Addenbrooke's Hospital.

◆◆ United we stand

What is it that holds together our four First Order Provinces of SSF: small in numbers and yet dispersed over vast distances?

Prayer, yes; exchange of brothers and sisters; and, very importantly, the triennial First Order Chapters which met at Hilfield at the end of August 1996.

It is in the developing world that the churches are growing; it is in the tired, rich world that the forces of materialism and the fallacies woven for us by a successful technology are arrayed against Christian faith. This is reflected even within the tiny Society of Saint Francis, spread world-wide. So, the provinces of SSF represented at Hilfield were variously young and growing fast (Pacific Islands), or older and sometimes struggling (European, American, Australia/New Zealand). The experience of those few days together gave the lie to any superficial estimate of our condition, based simply on the statistics – for we discovered among ourselves faith, hope and love in no small measure, and a realisation that each province needs the others. Perhaps those among us who hold the key to our future are not so much the holders of high office, as those who in the following of the Franciscan vocation find themselves living, praying and working for the Kingdom in a culture not their own.

◆◆ Our Man in Bosnia

Thomas Anthony spends much of his time in Eastern Europe: from January till Easter in 1996, he was in Bucharest looking after the Anglican chaplaincy there during their interregnum. In May, he went to Sofia with the unique mission to see whether the Diocese of Europe should send a permanent, resident chaplain. He spent five months there trying to build up a congregation. The result is that a chaplain will be appointed soon.

Later this winter, Tom expects to go to Sarajevo. He spent much of 1995 travelling in Bosnia-Herzegovina but is returning there to be part of a peace-making programme under the auspices of OFM, our Roman Catholic Franciscan brothers. Tom will be there for most of the year (but please continue to send any mail through the Plaistow house address).

◆◆ PNG Report

Brother Laurence writes from Siomomoro, Goroka, Papua New Guinea:

"Since the brothers left Nambayufa to come and live at St Francis Church compound, some local people have offered us land about an hour's walk from Goroka town and a small hut for four brothers to live in.



Michael Scott-Joynt, Bishop of Winchester, newly-elected Provincial Bishop Protector

The problem is that four brothers in such a small place makes us feel like bats in a cave! So we set to and have built a slightly larger house, where we can live and sleep, study and pray, work and relax.

As Franciscans, trying to live the vow of poverty, life is a real challenge to us here at Siomomoro: we have to live a simple life in a simple building, but then so do all our neighbours!

The brothers engage in many differing ministries and shared responsibilities but the main work the church asks of us is with youths and children – since more than half the population is aged under fifteen years, that is a great task. We have no resident priest here, so we all only have communion once a month, but we rely on the wider church for prayer: in that, we know we have a real sense of communion with all God's people."



Community of St Francis professed sisters gather for their annual meeting at Compton Durville Convent, June 1996

◆◆ New Ministry

Alan was ordained deacon by the Bishop of Newcastle at All Saints', Gosforth, on 29 September 1996. He is working as a curate in the parish of Christ Church, Walker, and is staying with the Sisters of the Assumption, who have a house in the area. SSF has been invited to lead an ecumenical mission for that area in 1998, in which both the Anglican parish and the Roman Catholic sisters will be much involved, along with the other main churches of Walker.

◆◆ Zimbabwe

Geoffrey has returned to the UK from Zimbabwe and is presently based at Hilfield. His permissions to stay as a 'visitor', which he had been renewing with the immigration authorities, were finally cancelled and he arrived in Britain on 25 November. The Community of the Divine Compassion at St Augustine's Mission, Penhalonga will now very seriously move into a new phase of its life after ten years of careful and dutiful nurturing by Geoffrey. With three professed African friars and four in the novitiate, the Community has a promising future. Damian visited Zimbabwe very recently and conducted their annual retreat at Chokwa, for which they were joined by **Roger Alexander**. CDC and SSF are linked by a Covenant through the SSF Minister General and **Benedict** SSF continues to live alongside the Community as the local parish priest. The brothers continue a fairly active, pastoral ministry in the mission school and the surrounding villages.

◆◆ Tertiaries, due South

Along with John Sentamu, the new Bishop of Stepney, **Tristram** represented the Archbishop of Canterbury at a conference in November in South Africa, on inculturation

in the liturgy.

As a result he was able beforehand to visit members of the Third Order in Capetown and Johannesburg, discovering from them the richness of their vocation as followers of the little poor man of Assisi. Many groups meet monthly and have a real sense of community spirit and mutual support, travelling huge distances so as to join together in christian fellowship.

◆◆ Leo House, Hilfield Friary

The Community at Hilfield hope to start renovations of the 'sixties building known as Leo House, at the heart of the Friary. The building houses the Friary Library and an Arts and Crafts workshop downstairs, together with a large common room used both by the community and by groups visiting for day conferences. Upstairs there are five bedrooms and another sitting room, for the use of Friary residents.

The brothers had hoped to begin the task in early 1997, and are certain that the work will still go ahead, but increasing costs have put some of their plans beyond their financial grasp and, along with others in these straitened times, will have to 'cut their cloth' accordingly.

However, guests and visitors will still be most welcome, but if you plan coming to use the Guest House, the guest brother asks that you do book well in advance, as the Friary will be down by five rooms for the period of renovation and other rooms may be required for storage.

The community at Hilfield hopes that you will bear with them patiently during this time and looks forward to the day when all the renovations will be completed – at the moment, it seems to them rather like painting the Forth Road Bridge: no sooner does one work end than another begins.

◆◆ Leo SSF, RIP

Brother Leo died on the feast of All Saints'

in San Francisco. He was aged eighty four and in the sixty-third year of his profession in vows. *Brother Justus Richard writes:*

While still a teenager Leo went to Little Portion Friary to test his vocation with the Order of St. Francis. He was made a postulant on Christmas Day 1932 and clothed as a novice the following June. He made his first profession on 18 August 1934 but had to wait until he was thirty years old to take perpetual vows, which he did in October 1940.

As a lay brother, he never held a leadership position in the Order of St. Francis but after the amalgamation of OSF and SSF he briefly served as Guardian of Little Portion, but much preferred the life of quiet, humble service and prayer that he was accustomed to. He not only cared for his brothers, but also never turned away any of God's hungry creatures. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

◆◆ Roundup

Chad San Andres, **Nicholas Alan** and **Robert Smart** have moved to Glasshampton . . . **Kevin** has moved to Birmingham . . . **Nolan Tobias** has moved to Edinburgh . . . **Philip** and **Desmond Alban** have moved to Hilfield . . . **David** has moved to Hilfield . . . **Hugo** has moved to Glasshampton . . . **Simeon Christopher** is on an inter-Provincial move to the Pacific Province for one year . . . **Jonathan** is similarly resident in the American Province for six months . . . **Kate** has returned to Compton Durville after a year on Leave.

Hilary has been appointed Assistant Minister Provincial and **Helen Julian** the Provincial Novice Guardian of CSF.

Nathanael has been co-opted as a member of the Governing Body of the Church in Wales (the equivalent of the Church of England's General Synod).

Daniel has been appointed the Assistant Minister General, succeeding **Robert Hugh** last September.

Peter has been granted Leave of Absence.

Antony Theodore and **Nicholas Bird** have withdrawn from the novitiate.

Holy Places, Holy People

An account of a visit to Egypt, Israel and Palestine

By Brother John Francis SSF

The idea of a visit to the Middle East suggested itself when a friend described the impact of such an experience at seventeen and the subsequent effect on his life. In 1989 Brother Seraphim SSF had urged me to see Egypt en route to the Holy Land: further visits for encounter, study and prayer showed the importance of this area, yet most visitors rarely see more than old stones and five star hotels.

With the help of Father Yohanna from the Coptic Church in Birmingham, the Bishopric for Ecumenical and Social Services in Cairo, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), and Ruth Ward (Southwark Diocesan Youth Officer), a month's programme was prepared. The aims were, firstly, to understand something of the history, culture and politics of these lands; secondly, to acquire a knowledge of their faith communities; and thirdly, to meet with other young people.

To make this possible for six students we sought funding from many sources, and expected them to raise money: "Thankfully", says one, "my church has a fund to assist young Christians to have this sort of experience." This article contains some of their responses.

We first flew to Luxor: "My mind is awash with images of Coptic icons, veiled Muslim women, Arab markets, holy places and beautiful young people"; "The pilgrimage began with a new sense of the mystery of God as a result of seeing Pharonic

monuments. This prepared me for explorations further north where we considered the birth of Christianity in Egypt." Then on to Beni Suef in Middle Egypt: "This is the real Egypt"; "my time there was incredibly humbling: I hope always to remember this when moaning about the most mediocre of things"; "Egyptian interest in us was overwhelming."

In the fourth-century Church of the Virgin at Gebel el-Teir, Samalut we met with a family I had known for some time: "They told us of Islamic discrimination and the need for a strong united faith manifested by a cross tattooed on the wrist and by unquestioning, dedicated devotion to God" But there were also shocks: "When we asked the women if they minded not being able to be priests they replied, 'No, it's forbidden'. The idea wasn't worth contemplating or having an opinion about." "Perhaps they identify themselves with the Body more than as individuals? They seemed less questioning than us, which in many ways seems admirable. Bible study at university took me through many intellectual loops! I am now convinced this is meaningless unless it changes your heart."

The late Pope, Kyrillos VI, sought to revive people in faith and holiness. Monastic communities played a vital role and vocations are numerous: "A Copt visiting a monastery is like a cross between Spring Harvest and Walsingham; faith is contemporary and ancient." We celebrated Mass in a fifth-century Chapel in Wadi Natroun, took part in the Liturgy and prayed at the Church of the Apparition of Saint Mary in Zeitoun, a poor suburb of Cairo. Here our Lady was seen (first by a Muslim) in 1968 and subsequently by thousands. "People show a devotion, through kissing holy objects, that is humbling, refreshing and exciting"; "Their devotion was part of everyday life, ordinary yet extraordinary"; "for the first time I began to realise the importance of honouring Mary."

"It was encouraging to feel part of the Body of Christ on earth and with countless faithful heroes cheering me on from above!"; "I was impressed by their belief but shocked to hear how little their religion changes"; "A

reassuring contrast to England where denominations perch uneasily on a shifting culture."

Coptic Christianity, having withstood the winds of Islam for 1300 years cut off from other churches, flourishes. Tradition is taken seriously and young people, full of the Spirit and evangelical zeal see themselves in a historical perspective, a revelation for some!

Then on to Cairo ("I loved the moment when suddenly, looming out of nowhere, there are the Pyramids. It left me awestruck") and the Gulf of Aqaba ("Absolute paradise"). "In the few weeks we spent in Egypt I learned a lot about these remarkable people: the importance of their faith and enjoyment of life. Many we met had little yet still greeted us with love and a big smile!"

We travelled to Israel, described to us by one Jewish academic as "the only country whose inhabitants can choose in which century to live." These words echoed loudly both at the Holocaust Museum and as we

*A Copt
visiting a monastery
is like a cross between
Spring Harvest
and Walsingham*

*

*Faith is both contemporary
and ancient*

talked with Jews and Palestinians: "the true reality of politics in Israel has been revealed to us – it is shocking"; "The English media skims the surface of Israeli politics"; "The treatment of Palestinians has gone unchecked and unnoticed."

Our visit to a refugee camp left a deep impression: "There seems much less moral decay than in Britain"; "A young man told us: 'If you discuss politics then you teach it. If you teach politics then you are political. If you're political then you can be arrested, imprisoned, interrogated and tortured'. Many young Palestinian men are." The Christian village of Beit Sahour, which has developed a Centre for Rapprochement Between Peoples, was equally impressive. "I admired the youth here who are overwhelmed by politics and religion. Surprisingly they weren't desperate but more content than 'luckier' people in England."

"I now question whether faith and politics can ever be separated" This became evident at the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem: "The glittering decorations and haunting singing convinced me of the problem of sensory deprivation in some Western churches"; "Christ came – and comes – to a world in pain, not to a Garden Tomb where everything is calm and peaceful and easy. Holy Sepulchre speaks to me of the faith of a suffering, as well as a



A baptism in a Coptic church in Egypt, where the newly-baptized are mitred!

triumphant, Christ"; "A supposed shrine to our Lord but in reality a battle ground for the hypocritical denominations that seek to control it." These complex and different cultural, religious and political contexts need to question us: despite history, Christians do live and (through organisations like the MECC) work together.

We discovered, amid hardship and injustice, that pride and hospitality to the stranger which is the mark of Arab society: that the more defensive you are the more vulnerable you become. "I find their community spirit a refreshing challenge. It frees people to show huge measures of hospitality and heart-warming displays of love and loyalty." "I found God again in the devotion of these people. Not the God I have had rammed down my throat and who is never satisfied, who asks me to smile all the time and deny my pain; but the God who loves me exactly as I am, who allows me to be real and who shares my pain."

In August 1997 there is to be a similar visit for Young Adults to Egypt, and in the Summer of 1998 an open Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Both will be focussed on exploring the faith and culture of these places rather than only visiting holy sites. They will give people the chance to explore these dynamic cultures and the vibrant faith which motivates them – do get in touch for further details. "I urge others to travel to these places and experience more about humanity, self and faith."

Pilgrim Journey

The five hours jumbo journey from Heathrow to Israel (only 4x12 minutes for the Israeli Air Force)

The timeless waters of the Galilee; the Jesus boats that stop, like time stood still

Our Franciscan pilgrimage set its face to Jerusalem, chick-sized city and apple of the broody eye. Thermometer at 45 degrees celsius.

Five a.m. on another Friday 2000 years after the event

We pilgrims enter Jerusalem by the Lion's Gate to follow the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha. It happened here! (a few yards down, or to the right, what matter?)

Here it was: the middle-aged, the stiff-upper-lipped; we were moved to tears.

The Holy Sepulchre itself – stuffed with reliquaries but still alive with angels, saying, "He is Risen! Seek him among the living stones where he's alive and well."

Elias, priest and teacher, father, abuna, building the new nation of blood brothers in Prophet Elias College, welcomes all comers, especially volunteers.

"I was born a baby, not a Christian or a Jew," he says. Like Him at Bethlehem (the Granary – the Place of Bread where Boaz set his heart on Ruth, the story goes) City of David, the House of Bread: the Cosmic Christ was born just here – the Word made Flesh, the bread of life, the Paradox.

The Holocaust Museum, sad litany of children's names: reproachful candles in a naughty world. Palestinian christian children: for export only, nowadays. Ghetto culture smoulders all along the Western Bank – the 'empty land' a myth. The Gaza strip.

Back home: thoughtful, needing digesting time for miracles, & savouring the marrow; the divine folly, the perennial paradox. The journey of a lifetime; a lifetime's journey.

Compiled by Minna Harvey, with contributions from Pauline, Margaret x2, George, John & Liz

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Why?

The future of the Religious Life

By Brother Samuel SSF

“We don’t seem to be getting many vocations these days,” said the Reverend Mother at a meeting of religious communities. That was something of an understatement, as there had not been a novice in her community for several years, and there was now just a small number of elderly sisters left.

The Religious Life, as we have known it, has shrunk dramatically over the past half century under the pressures of changing social patterns, the erosion of the idea of life commitment and a rising expectation of individual self-fulfilment. Many religious orders have already ‘gone under’. Are the rest of us going the same way? I’m not a gambling man, and I hesitate to predict the way things will turn out for us Franciscans or for any other congregation in the years ahead, but I have a strong hunch that there is a future for Religious Life in the Church, because we stand for three things which can speak to the prevailing culture of our world as we approach the third millennium.

Far from being a society in which religion is being squeezed out by scientific progress, the world today is witnessing an explosion of interest in almost any kind of religious experience. Look at the shelves of any high street bookshop, where publications on New Age spirituality, alternative therapies, Gaia theory and Eastern religions jostle for place alongside Bibles, Christian teaching programmes and CDs of Gregorian plainchant. Underlying the wide variety, and often superficial interest, there is a quest, a searching, which we recognise in the large number of people who come and stay in our community houses.

Our life as Franciscan sisters and brothers begins with the question we are asked as we are admitted as postulants: “What do you seek?”, and our response states very clearly where we stand and what we are about: “I seek God.” Before any work that we do, or any need or inclination of our own that is met through this life, our desire, our longing for God is the foundation and justification of our existence. The context of our searching is the Christian story of a God who has already sought and found us, and whose longing for us is greater than anything we can grasp. When lived to the full through prayer, worship and joyful participation in God’s creation, this seeking and being found is both transforming and attractive. We shouldn’t worry too much about new vocations – just live the life!

Back at the end of the fourth century, Saint Augustine of Hippo told a congregation in his cathedral that “God longs to give us something – the gift of himself – but we are unable to receive it because our hands are

already too full.” Sixteen hundred years later we are even more burdened with ‘fullness’. We can shop twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; we can select from any number of communications networks and channels for our entertainment; we can have at our fingertips more knowledge that we can possibly assimilate; we can travel the globe, choose our genes and re-build our faces – and yet we are still unsatisfied! In fact, there is a growing recognition that the free market, which has been allowed to run our society, is running out of control. “Those whom the gods would destroy they first drive mad.”

*Seeking God,
travelling light
and journeying together
are the three marks
of Franciscan religious life
for the future*

In such a world as this, Franciscan poverty can have a sharp cutting edge, not as a luddite approach to progress or a manichæan attitude to material things, but as a way of sitting lightly to all the glittering images of the market, from the latest technology or therapy to the most exciting new experience or opportunity. Sitting lightly means keeping our nerve amidst much of what is going on around us, not responding to every good offer, nor succumbing to the pressure to fill our hands with false treasures. Francis’s way of living the Gospel, his humour, his humility and his joy, can help us to open our hands and find room for the one great treasure of the Kingdom which alone can fill and sate us. In this radical way of life, we will find good company – even new brothers and sisters – because, as many of those who care for the well-being of our society now understand, travelling light holds the only future for ourselves and for the planet.

At the entrance to the Friary at Hilfield, we have erected a sign: “In Christ, Welcome”, as an expression of our desire to share the precious gift of community with others.

Community life reflects our experience of God who is Trinity and who calls us into ever deeper communion with him. It is made real for us in Jesus, our brother, through whom all people become our brothers and sisters. It is made possible for us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course, we do not claim to have got it all right or to be a perfect community – I sometimes think that it would all be much easier if it wasn’t for the other brothers and sisters! – but community is the greatest gift that we have to offer. It is also what both the Church and the world need. The Church needs community because people can only respond to the good news of Jesus Christ when they see it lived out in the context of a living fellowship of believers who are journeying together; in fact, community is an essential part of evangelism. The world needs community because, in our fragmented, privatised and individualistic society, people are quite simply dying for the lack of it.

Undoubtedly, there will be changes in Religious Life and in our particular Franciscan Way: this has always been a developing tradition. There will be new patterns of living in community, our approach to the surrounding culture will be different and God will always be the Mysterious One who leads us on. Like the Church as a whole, we will need to avoid the twin dangers of, on the one hand, being neurotically concerned about ourselves, attending successive conferences and meetings about the future, and trying to ‘defend’ our community life so that it might survive. On the other hand, we must be careful of losing our identity, forgetting that we are called to be different, and becoming captive to the latest trend or fashion.

Paradoxically, the more single-mindedly we seek God in our prayer, worship and our life as a whole, the lighter we travel in our frenzied world and the deeper our community life, the greater will be our appeal to the world around us. Risking all things for the love of God, we can be a sign of life, joy and hope for others. That was Francis’s pattern eight hundred years ago and it will do for our future too.



Brother Samuel SSF

Book Reviews

Father Andrew SDC **Christ the Companion**

Marcia Stearns, 1996, £4.25

It is over fifty years since Father Andrew SDC died, one of the most beloved of Anglican Franciscans. Most of the devotional texts he wrote are long out of print, so to commemorate this anniversary, Marcia Stearns has had re-printed his classic short meditations for each day of Lent and Easter in a compact paperback form. Added on are some entries for other major festivals and a group of prayers.

Andrew had a special talent with words. Just as he painted pictures with water-colours, so he created images with his pen. His rich vocabulary earned him the title of 'Father Superlative' in his community, but there is no jarring extravagance in this collection. His writing flows easily and warms the reader. He speaks directly yet gently, even noting that an admonition needs to be spiced with a sense of humour. The meditations, each based upon a scripture reading, are brought to helpful conclusions and soar above pious aspirations to challenge the reader.

The writing is sometimes bound by its times, the Second World War, and the themes of peace and reconciliation, of knowing God cares and heals even in the midst of distress, recur. "We are not led out of dark experiences: we are led through them." Whilst considering our darker sides during Lent, this is a message as relevant now as then. This is why Andrew can still speak to a new generation of followers of Saint Francis.

Petä Dunstan

Compilers: Panel of Monastic Musicians **Hymns for Prayer & Praise**

Canterbury Press Norwich, 1996, £14.99

After six years' work on the part of members of the Panel of Monastic Musicians, under the leadership of Professor John Harper, and after many more years of experimenting by Roman Catholic and Anglican religious communities, another hymn book has appeared. It is a hymnal with a difference, since it has not been designed for popular use. It is a book of 'Office Hymns', i.e. hymns which are generally objective in character and which – at the beginning of each of the daily Offices – set the tone of the season or festival or, like the familiar Compline hymn, *To you before the end of day* (No. 260) mark the time of day. From a vast amount of material the compilers have selected about 250 hymns. Many are translations of ancient hymns, others more recent. In most cases, 'thee/thou' forms have been avoided. Although the long metre (8.8.8.8) of many Latin hymns has been retained, other metres have been widely

explored as well. The book also offers a varied diet of music. To most hymns two tunes are set, the first a unison melody in the plainsong idiom, the second a measured tune which, where resources permit, can be accompanied or sung in harmony.

Hymns for Prayer & Praise has been designed primarily to meet the need of Religious Communities. An ecumenical resource, it will provide the richer body of hymn material for which many of us have been hoping. But it may well appeal more widely to any group of Christians who meet to celebrate the Daily Office. A welcome feature of this book is the provision of a two-week cycle of daily hymns for ordinary ('After Trinity') time.

Reginald SSF

Paul Rout OFM **Francis & Bonaventure**

Fount Christian Thinkers, 1996, £4.99

This is a small book for thoughtful Franciscans, for whom Bonaventure may be little more than a name. Paul Rout shows us that Bonaventure's achievement with regard to Francis can be compared with that of the New Testament writers with regard to Jesus – he was the theologian of Francis, his evangelist.

Within a short compass, Rout gives us a statement of the familiar (the story of Francis) and a readable introduction to Bonaventure and to those who were a major influence on his thought: Augustine, Pseudo-

Dionysius, and the Victorines. He then describes the two phases of Bonaventure's two phases, before and after his election as Minister General of the friars in 1257. In Chapter 6 we are given the present relevance of Bonaventure's work under the titles 'A spirituality of engagement', 'The moral life', 'The quest for knowledge', 'The beauty of God' and 'Authority within the Church'. Finally, we are reminded of the significance for interfaith dialogue of the encounter between Francis and Saladin at Damietta – for Bonaventure as for Francis, God is the God of all humanity, of all creation.

Readers of *franciscan* will enjoy and profit from this book – perhaps, too, from the titles suggested for further reading.

Anselm SSF

Jean Vanier **The Heart of L'Arche** & **An Ark for the Poor**

Geoffrey Chapman, 1995, £5.99 each

"... a way of humility and communion between two hearts." Such is the spirituality and call which is put forward in these two short books about L'Arche communities, their founding and development.

The first is an excellent introduction to how L'Arche began and the spirituality which underpins it. The gulf between what society demands as the norm and what people with learning disabilities can give is illustrated again and again from the teaching of Christ. The problems of living in community with people who are often considered to be the least important is described both in their joys and difficulties.

The theology of the heart, the 'way of humility', is a turning of society's values on their head. Vanier describes the pain of falling short of this ideal in L'Arche communities, and yet the need to strive for it.

The second book traces the development of L'Arche from the founding of one household of three people in Trosly-Breuil to over a hundred communities all over the world. This is more detailed and is probably more accessible to people who know a little of L'Arche. The life of a mature community is frankly depicted: he describes with pain how individuals and communities floundered or left the federation of L'Arche. This book touches many important aspects of L'Arche life: problems of normalisation, the meaning of covenant, the place and choice of assistants. Is more thought-provoking and question-raising than problem-solving.

Both books are plainly and frankly written and reach beyond those who are involved with L'Arche. As Vanier says, our human history, both people with and without a learning disability, 'is both beautiful and painful.'

Lee Rowe

(*Lee is a community member of L'Arche Lambeth*)

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The Wounds of Choice

By Petà Dunstan

Imagine yourself at Hilfield before the Second World War. It's the Depression. There are many wayfarers – and very few brothers to minister to them. There is but one young novice. He must make a decision: should he be professed as a brother or not? He feels increasingly confident that that is indeed God's will for him. But at that point, his world is turned upside down – for he receives two dramatic and unexpected letters. They concern the two most significant women in his life.

The first letter comes from his brother, who has long provided a home for their widowed mother. Tragically this brother has got into great financial difficulties and, with his own family to care for, he begs his younger brother to leave the Religious Life, find a position and so care for their mother.

The other letter comes from the novice friar's sister. It concerns his closest female friend, who has long been in love with him, and whom he has loved in return. His sister asks him not to forget this young woman and not to break her heart, because she has vowed to marry no one else if she can not marry our novice. She is still as loyal to him now as when he first went to try his vocation two years before.

The young friar was devastated. He felt trapped in an impossible dilemma. If he left Hilfield, he would disobey what he felt was a profound call from God and would be deserting the brotherhood at a time when it might collapse if he withdrew. On the other hand, to follow this vocation would mean causing great pain to those he loved.

Whichever path he chose, he would bear wounds and others he loved would be wounded. And these wounds would be with him always. He could move on once the decision was made, but the consequences would always be with him. The decision the young novice had to make all those years ago would 'brand him with the marks of Jesus' in his heart and his soul.

We have all probably been in a position like that at some point in our lives. St Francis certainly was. He gave up economic security, social position, the respect of many of those around him, including his family, because he felt called to witness to certain values. So for me, when I look at the Stigmata, I don't just think of them as a symbol, an echo, of Christ's suffering, but also as a visible symbol of St Francis' own inner wounds. They speak to us of the pain of Francis' sacrifices, the 'cost of his discipleship', a physical reminder of the inner struggle of choosing to live for Jesus.

Our adult lives are about choices: choices which may wound us. I believe the Stigmata challenges us about our wounds. We have to give up things – and people – sometimes. We have to choose one job, one home, one relationship, one life, over and above

another. And a Christian life demands these certain sacrifices alongside giving certain joys. Those decisions leave us with our very own stigmata.

So where are your stigmata? They might have something to do with your own sense of vocation. They might be about a decision you took. They might concern a relationship you felt you had to give up, an opportunity you passed by, or a failure to achieve what you set out to do. Any life situation in which you took a difficult decision knowing that some hurt was caused to others and to yourself. You may have been wrong, but you nevertheless made your choice in good faith. And deep inside you still feel a pain about it. You still have a wound.

So, how do we Christians deal with our wounds? The first step is in recognizing that these wounds are there. That is not always an easy thing to do. For we live in a culture in which success is an idol. We are expected to achieve, to win, not be a 'loser'. We should aim to 'have it all'. It is all a matter of succeeding. In such a world, pain is unacceptable. It is seen as a sign of failure either in ourselves or others. So we are tempted to pretend. We act unwounded.

And then comes the time when we can not do it any more. We have to cry out. Our culture then pushes us fast in the opposite direction. We become 'walking failures', convinced of our unworthiness and uselessness. We agonise over the negative sides of our lives and become locked in self-doubt and low self-esteem. We chase imaginary failures and analyse quite trivial problems. We believe we are too fat, too ugly, too stupid, too slow. And chasing all these exaggerations is just another way of avoiding the real issues and looking at the real wounds.

So, as Christians, our first step is to witness honestly, neither evading our wounds nor becoming obsessed by them. We then have to take a second step. We have to see our wounds as part of who we are. For these very wounds are one of the creative forces of our own personalities and of our own Christian commitment. They are not alien or separate, but integral to the human being we have become. They are a part of the whole person, whom God loves unconditionally, and so part of the whole we

too must love. Healing is not about discarding but about accepting. We do not heal our wounds by cutting them out and throwing them away. We heal them by surrounding them with love.

And so to the final step. Christ teaches us that pain and suffering are not an end. We transcend them by transforming them into a beginning, and using them as an opportunity for growth. So if we have had to make a difficult choice, we should live out fully the way we have chosen. Think of our novice friar at the beginning. Whichever decision he makes, he should try to live it positively. For either path can be an affirmation. The pain of the initial choice can lead to the joy of commitment.

As an Easter people, we are proclaimers of the truth of the Resurrection. The power that gives us is that we know vulnerability and weakness are truly a strength. It is then because of our wounds that we can proclaim our faith. And we are no longer afraid of the wounds of others because we have a message of hope and love to give them. We can use our own experience to help and comfort others. Our wounds become a window to the truth of the Gospel for us.

To acknowledge, to honour and to use creatively – that is what our novice friar did all those years ago. The year it happened was 1932. The young friar was Charles Preston. In the end, he chose to be professed. That the decision cost Father Charles much is shown by the fact that when he died in 1961, he still possessed those two letters. They were indeed his hidden stigmata. He knew the pain of choice. Keeping those letters meant he could never forget and was acknowledging his wound, whilst his loving personality was ample witness to his honouring all that he was. He went on to be one of the most beloved of SSF brothers, a great missionary and spiritual director – especially to women. With much love and joy did he bear the marks of Jesus. Will we be able to do the same?

This is a shortened version of a sermon preached at the 1995 Stigmata Festival at Hilfield Friary.



Dr Petà Dunstan is the Librarian of the Divinity School in the University of Cambridge. Her history of SSF will be published later this year.